Fire of Youth — by Henry James Forman

"Done!" he exclaimed, taking hold of her white, tremulous wrists. "It's not what you've done. It's what I haven't done."

Continued from Last Sunday

CHAPTER XVI.

A New Life.

ADELA GRAY and Clarice Hyde, who shared a small apartment in the "Rubens," that rabbit warren of studios in Eighth avenue, were preparing a dinner fit for the gods—in a chafing dish.

"Do you think," inquired Clarice, arms akimbo over her paint-flecked smock, her pleasant face flushed by the heat of the gas burner, "do you think, Addie, a dinner fit for the gods in a chafing dish could ever be a success?"

"My dear," cried Adela, lifting her eyes from their intent contemplation of the salad bowl, "of course I do. If those gods are in the chafing dish, the poor old chicken can't possibly go wrong, don't you see—not a chance—even if it tried ever so hard."

"No," pensively answered Clarice. "I suppose the poor thing knows it's dedicated, doesn't it?"

"Dedicated and consecrated," affirmed Adela.

"Too bad there's only one man coming," murmured Clarice. "Do you think Anthony is a god?" she added with a feigned air of naive simplicity she loved to assume. Adela pretended not to hear and did not answer.

"I know you do," half whispered Clarice. But Adela's hearing had deteriorated. A faint flush was her only response. Clarice turned toward the chicken a la King and smiled. There were times when even she, privileged though she was, thought it best not to tease Adela further. The spirit of mischief in her, however, seemed to be warmed by the gas burner.

"Did gods ever eat salad?" she ventured again.

"No, dear," Adela answered inscrutably. "Nebuchadnezzar was the first on record, I believe. And he ate it," she went on quickly, "only after his great dream. And you, missie, better stop dreaming and watch the chicken—or salad is all you'll eat."

Clarice laughed and turned chickenward again.

For six months now Adela had been living in New York. The difficulty of gathering sufficient money for her venture had given her a tedious and miserable additional year of longing for her hegira. But here she was at last, an art student at the League, living with her fellow student, Clarice Hyde, and enjoying at least a portion of her heart's desire.

It was now April, nineteen-sixteen. Some twenty-odd months had passed since Anthony's return from London. History, ordinarily so snail-like in her pace, had taken monstrous strides. We in America who were still neutral, except as to our sympathies, were living as under an opaque shadow of events, daily expecting the sun of sanity to emerge upon the mad storm of Europe. But still the cry of the aggressors seemed to be that of Kipling's beasts: "Let in the jungle! Let in the jungle!" In America, more consistently perhaps than anywhere else, people felt that no such evil could triumph under the sun. But still it was triumphing. Belgium was devastated, northern France lay waste, the Lusitania had been sunk, and from the sea to Switzerland the gigantic armies lay locked as in a death grapple.

Yet near though we were to the catastrophe, our daily life was little changed. Red Cross and other bodies were soliciting funds for the stricken, and we were proud to be feeding the entire nation of Belgium. Prices were rising and dyes were unobtainable. But New York was still building a subway. Fifth avenue looked precisely the same. Manufacturers for the most part were growing enormously rich and speculation on the Stock Exchange frequently broke from the financial columns to the first page of the newspapers.

Speculation was drawing Anthony also to its fitful flare. Old man Judd was right, after all. No broker seemed able to abstain from speculation altogether. Fabulous tales were current of profits in steels and munitions, and hardly any one could resist their appeal. It was like the lure of the lottery in Latin countries. Even Douglas Nash, whose bird-like little mother was still egging him on to fortune and a rich marriage, had both made and lost a few hundreds of dollars. Douglas also kindly undertook to induct Anthony into the society of the chorus as a makeshift and a safety valve pending that fortunate marriage. But the rites of chorus girl suppers, with their loud, vulgar, tricked-out beauties, somehow failed to interest Anthony.

Anthony was the same, and yet he was a new Anthony. Personal history that marches to a rhythm of its own had drilled him, as it drills all of us, to its relentless routine, writing the result unmistakably upon his features. The expression in his eyes betrayed a firmer grip and a graver insight. When men spoke of experience as regarded the difficult and ever-absorbing sex of woman, he smiled—not the coltish grin of the adolescent, but the soberer smile that bespoke a certain knowledge. He now observed occasionally that he knew nothing at all about women—sign of the true initiate.

His return from London had seemed to mark off his past as with a heavy black line. Liggett, who knew something of the reasons for his journey, had welcomed him back virtually without question. He had felt conscientiously responsible for having introduced Anthony to the woman, Vilma Vanleer. An honest man was Liggett, in his fashion.

The first week of monk-like solitude and seclusion that followed upon Anthony's return had given way to a more normal existence. Even his disappointment over Joe Shelburn's dereliction had been mitigated by the appearance of Joe some five weeks after his own arrival, and by Joe's reluctant, grudging assent to a financial arrangement in favor of Grace Thomas—for whom all history had very nearly ceased when her child was born.

"But remember," Joe had insisted, with a cunning look in his hard, foxy little eyes, "all money in cash—and it goes through you. I don't want to see her." And Anthony had acquiesced, for Grace's need was great. At stated times he made his journey to the polar regions of the Bronx and transferred the money to Grace. With her baby she was now living alone, self-brevetted as Mrs. Thomas.

The following Autumn Adela had arrived, to Anthony's surprise and delight. The Adela he had last seen at home, the Adela he had kissed, seemed to have faded from his memory. He remembered chiefly the thin, long-legged girl of his boyhood. Her transformation into this radiant and active young woman, alive with energy, with eyes that could flash as well as twinkle — full of joys and enthusiasms and electric fires—seemed a miracle of creation. Her vitality was as bracing as a tonic. There was a limpid purity in her eyes that overawed him. No woman had ever looked at him so directly and so searchingly as Adela. The pallor of her girlhood was gone. There was a fine color in her cheeks and a sense of veiled emotion hung about her that haunted him even in his dreams.

"Little Addie!" he would murmur to himself as he kept evoking her image. To think that she had grown into this bewilderingly radiant woman! He could not get over the marvel of it.

* * * * * * *

The girls in the studio that April night were still busily collating the supper when they heard a knock at the door.

"Oh, dear!" whispered Clarice, hastily dropping the casement-cloth curtain that separated the culinary department from the social. "Why are men so stupid? They always think seven o'clock means seven—as though the chafing dish knew that!"

"Silly Clarice!" retorted Adela, moving toward the door. "As though Anthony would mind. He'll love to see it done."

"He sees too much—that young man," muttered Clarice, "or not enough."

"Hello, Addie!" Anthony greeted. His voice was deeper than of yore. "What a scrumptous smell!"

"Couldn't get that at the Ritz—could you?" said Adela, her hand still in his. "You're just in time."

"Hours too soon, you mean," sang out Clarice from behind the curtain.

"No—am I?" he paused in the process of removing his coat.

"Yes—am I?" responded the invisible Clarice. "Is he arrayed in purple and pine linen?"

"Not in purple," Adela answered for him.

"As if you could tell!" moaned Clarice.

"Shall I go out and run round the block?" Anthony put in.

"No—might as well stay," trailed the woeful voice of the invisible girl.

"A shame, you girls going to all this trouble," protested Anthony, "when you might as well have come out and dined with me."

"Exactly!" retorted Clarice, suddenly appearing from behind the curtain. "Why do we do it, Addie?"

"Beware, cook, or—I'll kiss you!" he cried with a threatening movement. Whereat both of them laughed and Adela turned away. She would have given much for this spirit of light banter that was always going on between Clarice and Anthony, but with her he was always more grave and serious. And this situation, perfectly comprehensible to the keen-witted Clarice, gave her ineffable amusement.

"Go, man," said Clarice with a gesture of aloof command, "help Addie put the finishing touches to the table. Those who will not work—neither shall they eat, as Shakespeare hath it.' She might have been some imperious Diana looking with cold contempt on mating mortals.

"Shakespeare hath — hath he?" queried Anthony.

"Yeth, he hath!" she threw at him with disdain and disappeared behind the curtain.

"What do I do, Addie?" Anthony turned to her with enthusiasm.

"Well," speculated Addie, with a finger to her chin, "you could move the piano and the kitchen stove. But the best thing is, you sit down on the couch and look on." She removed the salad to the top of a bookcase near the empty plates. "I can do all the rest."

Anthony sank down on the couch with a sigh of contentment.

"That surely is the best thing I do," he admitted.

"Tell us something of the great world," encouraged Adela as she moved about the room.

"The great world," he repeated. "What can a broker know of the great world?"

This was a thrust at Adela. She always spoke in a tone of regret, howsoever veiled, of his occupation. He was wasting his talents, she maintained, on a task that any clerk might perform equally well.

"Well, what do you think I am—a genius?" he had protested. But in his heart he sadly agreed with her. Ever since his return from Europe, however, a nameless inertia had overcome him and he could not think of doing anything else.

The long closure of the Stock Exchange after the declaration of war in Europe had given him some pause for reflection. Thinking of Adela had recalled to him some of his early ambitions, as they had been wont to talk about them in their childhood. "Look at all the things you can do," Adela had said. "Be a statesman—a diplomat—be great!" Soldiering, sailoring, the law—they had discussed all of those things.

"The dreams of a kid," Anthony thought wistfully. And he hung on at Liggett's. And that was one of Adela's crosses.

Soon Clarice, now smockless but her face still hotly flushed, appeared in a pretty blue frock, chafing dish before her, and proclaimed:

"Let anybody dare to pretend to even betray a soupcon that they think this isn't good!"

"Nobody could, darling," Adela assured her; "it'll be delicious."

"You bet," cried Anthony; then he caught Clarice's severe look bent upon him, for she was always reproving him for profanely brokerizing the purity of the English language.

"I mean to say," he quickly corrected himself, "I'll wyger 'arf a quid, lydy, this 'ere stew'r top 'ole! That ought to satisfy anybody. Pure English undefiled," he added.

They took their places at the little table in the alcove, the other half of which was the curtained kitchen.

The sense of adventure was about their board under the pretty red paper candle shades. They began on the grapefruit the while an alcohol burner kept the gleaming chafing dish hot in the centre of the table, and there were even two small glass vases of flowers flanking the chafing dish. To Anthony it was delightful, with a vague, delicious sense of recapturing lost youth. He was no poseur, except as every young man who has tasted what is called life is to some extent a poseur. In the same way the middle-aged man often poses as young.

They chattered of art, of painting and of Clarice's sublimated junk, as she called it, for Clarice was a worker in silver as well as a painter.

Mysterious girl, Clarice! She spoke vaguely of an aunt as "the dear old Philadelphia lady," and seemed to have no other family ties. She was humorous, gay, yet often moody and depressed. The cross of her life was lack of personal beauty. She pretended to exult that this defect freed her from the bondage to men, yet she was forever girding at masculinity as the evil genius of creation. She was excellent company and she adored the beauty and the fine flame of Adela and Adela's earnestness. Three weeks after they had met in the art class she had asked Adela to come to live with her "in order to reduce expenses." Yet after that she never spoke of money, was never extravagant and never pinched. Adela was aware that Clarice could have got on equally well without her share of the expenses, and yet Clarice was meticulous in her accounts.

There was a period during that American neutrality of ours, inconceivable now, when the war was barred in conversation. That was before April, nineteen-seventeen. So, though those young people were ardent readers of the newspapers, they confined themselves to trifles.

"What," asked Clarice, challenging, "does our man-of-the-world say to this humble repast—prepared to do him honor?"

"If you mean me," Anthony said, "I say it is wonderful. And it does me pleasure—which is better than honor."

"Listen to him! The traveled man—the knower of London—of the Savoy Hotel—of what and all."

The mention of London brought a shadow to Anthony's face and Adela glanced at him swiftly. Intuitively she felt that his London visit, of which he spoke so seldom, was somehow bound up with the nameless, indefinable barrier that had arisen in their boy-and-girl relationship. Nevertheless, if it were not pleasant to him to speak of it, she was loyally determined to save him.

"Bother London!" she declared. "I think New York is the loveliest big city on earth. Think of the possibilities—of the good times we can have—evenings such as this."

And Clarice, who understood—it was uncanny the way that girl understood—patted her hand affectionately.

"Oh, I am so glad, Addie, that you were able to come to New York!" Anthony exclaimed with warmth. "You feel about it the way I did—the way I do yet."

Clarice watched him narrowly. Was he glad Adela had come to New York? It had not taken Clarice long to understand Adela's real reason for coming.

"Oh, the young geese!" she said to herself, "the young geese!"

The telephone bell rang.

Clarice leaped up and answered it. The cryptically sounding half of a duologue ensued.

"Yes, indeed, I shall come over—lovely—of course—right away—you dear thing!" concluded Clarice and came back to her friends from the shadowy cover.

"Listen, my children," she told them. "The dear old Philadelphia lady has just arrived in town and I've got to run over to the Manhattan Hotel to see her. Will you be good until I come back?"

Adela looked at her intently. Clarice was perfectly capable of having arranged this call beforehand, so as to leave them alone. But also, it might be true. The face of Clarice, however, was inscrutable.

"Can we take you there?" Adela asked her.

"Oh, dear, not for worlds. I meet my Philadelphia lady alone and unaided." There was no gainsaying her. Hastily she began to clear the table and transfer the things behind the curtain, where the visiting maid would find them in the morning. Adela was not sorry, but neither was she rejoiced. She had been with Anthony alone before, many times. But that curious shadow, intangible, incomprehensible, seemed always to arise between them and to make Anthony less himself than when Clarice was present. Clarice disappeared into her bedroom for a moment and emerged before they knew it, hatted, veiled, pulling on her gloves.

"Now, good-by, children," she said, and there was something almost maternal in her voice. Her eyes seemed to flick Adela with a darting look of tenderness as she turned to Anthony.

"I'll be back by eleven—so I shall see you again—later." And seizing a wrap near the door she vanished into the corridor.

Anthony and Adela looked at one another and smiled.

They were standing, and Adela, in a white frock with shoulders and arms gleaming through the filmy stuff, her clear eyes shining, appeared wonderfully lithe and electric and pure.

"You look like an incarnation of something, Addie," he was lighting a cigarette. "Ulalume—or Annabel Lee—or one of those filmy ladies."

She laughed.

"I feel very matter-of-fact, Anthony, I assure you," she told him. "There is nothing—dreamy about me."

She removed the tablecloth and sat down on the couch facing him, her chin on her hand and her elbow resting on her knee. Through her mind was running the thought:

"He did not think me so ethereal when he kissed me that day in Little Rapids."

"Matter-of-fact," he repeated. "No—that you never were, Addie."

"If I'm not," she replied after a pause, "then I wish I were." Anthony gazed at her in silence for a moment.

"May I ask why?"

She smiled indulgently — almost tenderly.

"Then perhaps I could understand you better, Anthony."

"Am I—yes, I suppose I am pretty commonplace." He attempted a level tone, but there was a note of injury in it all the same.

"Oh, no, Anthony! Don't put things like that into my mouth. I didn't mean that. But—may I speak plainly?"

"Fire away, Addie."

"Well, then—I don't understand just what it is New York has done to you. You seem to go about with your head in the clouds, and you're satised with being a broker. Are men so easily satisfied in life? You used to have wonderful ambitions. . . . It was thrilling, uplifting to me to talk to you about them. That's what gave me any scrap of ambition I have. I saw all sorts of possibilities for you. What is it that kills ambitions and ideals in men's souls? Oh, if I only knew—if I only knew! There—I've been horrid, haven't I—to talk like that? Forgive me." And she touched his hand lightly and looked away.

For some time they sat in silence. Anthony's fingers were working nervously on the arms of his chair. His past life flashed before him in review—a whirl of fragmentary pictures—Vilma—Vilma's flat—Vilma sitting opposite him in a restaurant—Vilma's shoulders—Vilma's sensual lips and eyes—that was what had killed his ambitions, killed as by slow poison—and now, was he utterly bankrupt? Self-revelation is the severest of ordeals, and that is why so few endure it. What could he say—what could he offer in extenuation? Adela was a very vivid reality facing him. But he was gazing far beyond her, far and deep into his own soul.

"All that you say is true, Addie," he murmured slowly. "I am weighed and found wanting."

"But how did it happen?" she

Continued on Next Page.